

OBITUARY NOTICE OF CHARLES D. MEIGS, M. D.

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(Read before the American Philosophical Society, March 21st, 1873.)

In preparing an obituary memoir of our deceased associate, Dr. Charles D. Meigs, the writer must wish for the talent of a practised limner who would give the portraiture of a man of pure morals, kind and gentle, and deferentially polite, in an age of assertion, adorning and ennobling his profession by his writings and prelections, his skill and tact in devising, and opportune the in application of the means for relief and cure of sickness and suffering at all hours, and at the sacrifice of his personal comfort and domestic and social pleasures.

Doctor Meigs was born February 19th, 1792, in the Island of Bermuda, where his parents had taken up their temporary abode, but in a few months after they returned to their native home in New Haven, Connecticut. At the age of seven years he accompanied his father to Athens, Georgia, on the occasion of the latter being made President of the College at that place. Under such favoring auspices the education of young Charles was carried on with the happiest results, as manifested by his knowledge of the Greek and Latin classics, in addition to that in other branches. He acquired, through an intimate intercourse with a French emigrant noble, a command of that language, so that he was able to speak and write it with great fluency and idiomatic accuracy. During a portion of his boyhood his delicate frame and health gained strength and restoration by following the advice of his physician, that he should go for a season into the Cherokee country and participate to a certain extent in Indian life. Here he found in the person of one of the natives a companion and teacher in riding and shooting, whose extempore lessons were probably more effective for the purposes intended than formal instruction in the ménage or cavalry drill. It was Chiron teaching the future follower of Esculapius. He graduated at the University of Georgia in 1809. In the same year, 1809, Dr. Meigs began his medical studies under the instructions of Dr. Fendall (supposed in Augusta, Georgia,) to whom he was apprenticed for three years and took his degree of the Doctorate in the University of Pennsylvania, in the year 1815. His next step in life, to him in every way a fortunate one, was his marriage with Miss Mary Montgomery, of Philadelphia. From this union came a numerous issue, all of the members of which were estimable, some distinguished members of society. Much as may be accorded in this case to a father's good example, still more was due to the affectionate care and judicious guidance of the mother who in the discharge of her home duties cared not for the glitter of fashion and found ample space for the exercise of her true privileges without bustling in the crowd and joining in angry discussions on woman's rights.

The field chosen by Dr. Meigs for professional labor was Augusta, Georgia, and the selection was followed by every prospect of success, but the ill-health of Mrs. Meigs made him abandon his expectations and remove to Philadelphia. Through the temporary cloud of disappoint-

ment at his being obliged to change the theatre of action, even his sanguine nature would hardly prompt him at the moment to indulge in visions of professional fame and honors, which lay before him in a somewhat lengthened prospective. He had, like most of those most distinguished in the annals of medicine, to undergo a period of probation, in which patients were the persons who in smallest number came under his notice. But, whilst waiting for business, he was neither an idle nor a querulous expectant, nor a lounge watching for something to turn up, nor worse still, becoming a devotee of Bacchus and turning his back on the tutelary Apollo. He read and studied, and as a kind of literary exercise he began to compose a work of fiction, but never got further than the opening scenes. He would have preferred engaging in a translation of Haller's *Elementa Physiologiae*, if he could have received encouragement from a publisher; but medical books of home production, either original or translated, were at that time few in number.

In this early period of his life, Dr. Meigs took an active part in the discussions in the Philadelphia Medical Society, in participation with others of his compeers, who afterwards gained for themselves a name as writers and teachers.

Among the early printed productions of his was the annual discourse before the Society, delivered February 18th, 1829.

He was one of the first to join in the formation of the Kappa Lambda Society, founded by Dr. Samuel Brown of Kentucky, in one of his annual visits to Philadelphia, the only defect of which was its being for some time a secret one. Its objects were the elevation of the medical profession, increase of its usefulness, and the promotion of harmony and good fellowship amongst its members. With this view it framed a code of ethics and brought out in 1825 a quarterly periodical called the *North American Medical and Surgical Journal*. It was the good fortune of the present writer as chairman of a committee on the projected *Journal* to be instrumental in having Dr. Meigs appointed one of its five editors; his associates in the work were, Drs. Bache, Coates, Hodge, La Roche, to whom were added at a subsequent period, Drs. Wood, Condie, and Bell. To the pages of the *North American Medical and Surgical Journal*, which soon met with the favor of the profession, both at home and abroad, the subject of our memoir contributed his share in the shape of original articles, reviews and a portion of the *Quarterly Summary*. His department in this last was Midwifery,—an attribution which showed a great change in his own views and action respecting this important branch of Medicine. In the first period of his career he carefully kept himself aloof from practising it, with an aversion scarcely less decided than that expressed by Lord Brougham against law, when it was a question with him whether to take it up as a profession, engage in the exclusive exercise or enter into public life. Writing from Edinburgh, Brougham says, that he still continues to detest his cursedest of all cursed professions; and some years later when in the Middle Temple, he tells Lord Gray, that there are few things so hateful as this profession; but notwithstanding

this extreme repugnance, he became a member of the English Bar, went on the Northern Circuit, and concluded his legal career by being made Lord Chancellor.

Doctor Meigs was induced to change his course by the advice of judicious friends, who pointed out to him the advanced age of the prominent practitioners of Midwifery and the room that would ere long be left for younger aspirants. Accordingly he entered at once with his characteristic ardor the untried road, and soon began to win reputation for his assiduous attention and the skillful management of his patients, who were warm in their praises of their new accoucheur. With a knowledge of his great sensibility and imaginative turn of mind, one can readily understand the effort it must have cost him to subject himself to the trials of patience, under the wearisome details, the anxiety and responsibility which he continually encountered, in a still greater degree than in the ordinary practice of medicine, which of itself has a heavy load of cares to carry. The explanation must be found in the very qualities of the man, which made him regardless of difficulties and obstructions in the excited determination to overcome them, in the lofty belief that he had become a ministering spirit endowed with the almost apostolic powers for the relief of those who placed themselves under his care, and appealed to him in their trouble.

Once engaged in his mission, he gave himself no pause nor halted on the way, but steadily, cheerfully and kindly, at all hours and seasons, placed himself at the command of those who sought his services. If these were not always remembered with gratitude he did not complain, but consoled himself with the overflowing thankfulness and warm regard of those, and the number was continually increasing, who had been soothed and relieved by his ministrations.

Once fully engaged in the practice of Obstetrics he determined to make himself master of its literature, and with this view he set himself to a translation of Velpeau's Treatise on Midwifery, and projected an elementary work of his own on the same subject. Reference to a Medical Journal, edited at the time by the present writer, exhibits his opinion of this work in the following terms :

"The author writes in a style of blended aphorism and narrative, the first succinct and modestly laid down, the second clear and untrammelled by extraneous matters. We feel as if we were conversing with one who had read much, practised much and meditated well on the various important questions embraced in his favorite branch of medical science, and who, whilst giving his own experience, is not desirous to dogmatize his own doctrine nor needlessly disparage those of others. If here and there a phrase somewhat figurative is met with, the reader will see that it does not mislead him as to the meaning; and he ought also to be informed that the author, so far from aiming at false effect by this means, deserves credit for his successfully keeping under wholesome restraint an active imagination, if not a temperament somewhat poetical. There is just evidence enough of these latter in an agreeable coloring of the style and turn of thought, without false analogies or exuberant phraseology."

The former appeared in 1831, and the latter (entitled "The Philadelphia Practice of Midwifery") in 1838.

At an earlier date, and while still an editor of the Medical Journal, he had brought out a translation of Hufeland on Scrofula, in 1829, and in the same year the annual discourse before the Philadelphia Medical Society. As we find him at this time, so he continued in the whole of his subsequent professional career, snatching at every interval left in his attendance on his patients to continue his studious life. Often would he, returning to his home from a detention through the greater part of the night in a sick-room, sit down to his desk and cheat himself of the few remaining hours till morning, in place of gladly taking the needed repose. This strain on mind and body carried with it the risk of a break down of both, and ambition's honors being lost when they are almost within grasp. Dr. Meigs in his reasoning process paid a heavy penalty for a neglect of the laws of nature in much severe suffering from an abdominal neuralgia, and also from a bronchial attack; but he rallied, regained his elastic bearing and customary strength, and resumed his onward course radiant and rejoicing to carry his sunshine of reviving spirit and skill into a long succession of sick-rooms.

On the breaking out of the Asiatic epidemic cholera in Philadelphia, in the summer of 1832, there was a call made for the services of a number of her physicians to help to stay the pestilence and mitigate its violence. On such occasional medical men are always eager volunteers to encounter the assaulting fiend, in disregard of their ease and health, and ready to make the forlorn hope, and sacrifice their lives for the public good and safety.

No blast of trumpet, no beat of drum heralded the advance of the physician to the conflict; and no honors are awarded to his success, no commemorative monument raised to his memory if he falls a sacrifice to his duty. Within the short period of six months during which the yellow fever of 1793 raged with the greatest violence in Philadelphia, no less than ten physicians were carried off by the disease and scarcely one of the surviving members of the faculty escaped an attack.

In the famine year of 1847, in Ireland, one hundred and seventy-eight Irish practitioners, exclusive of medical students and army surgeons, died of the prevailing typhus fever, being a proportion of nearly seven per cent. of the entire medical professional force of the country. The popular belief is that physicians have a kind of charmed life which gives them an immunity from the common causes of disease, and it is a matter of wonder that they bear up so well as they do under the various circumstances in which they are so continually placed.

Dr. Meigs was chosen to take charge of one of several temporary hospitals opened and fitted up by the city for the reception and treatment of patients who had no home nor the means of procuring suitable diet and nursing. In acknowledgment of their services, which happily were of short duration and unattended by mortality in their number, he, in common with each of his associates, received from the City Councils a silver pitcher.

A vacancy in the chair of Midwifery in the University of Pennsylvania, was created by the broken health and subsequent resignation of Dr. Dewees; and Dr. Meigs presented himself as a candidate for the succession. The contest between him and his successful rival, Dr. Hugh L. Hodge, was animated and served to extend a knowledge of his professional and personal merits. His disappointment on the occasion was keen, but was soon compensated for by his receiving with, we believe, entire unanimity on the part of the Trustees of the institution, the Professorship of Midwifery in the Jefferson Medical College in 1841. Three other chairs, viz. : of the Practice of Medicine, Chemistry, and Surgery, were filled at the same time by the election of Drs. John K. Mitchell, Franklin Bache, and Thomas D. Mutter; the other Professors were Drs. Joseph Pancoast, Robert M. Huston, and Robley Dunglison. Under this re-organization of the Faculty, the fortunes of the Jefferson College, which in former years had been often clouded and adverse, became at once propitious and successful, and to this happy result it must be said with a full appreciation of the ability and attainments of his associates in the College, Dr. Meigs largely contributed. With his professional treasury full to overflowing, earnest in inculcation, fluent in speech, easy and familiar, often approaching to colloquy in delivery he made his youthful auditory feel that they were addressed by a wise, experienced and affectionate parent whose lessons, whether of encouragement or warning amid the trials of the sick-room, were at once their belief and deeply impressed on their memory, to serve for their future guidance. Some shading to this picture is found in affluence of speech, which was sometimes redundant, and a euphemism leading to affectation in style, but in his case there was no straining after effect, and it seemed as if he could not help embellishing the substance of his prelections by word-ornament which was not always taken from the vernacular. His love for the beautiful was ingrained in his philosophy, and gave a coloring both to his written and spoken compositions, and the strongest instance of which is exhibited in his work, "Woman: Her Diseases and Remedies," in the form of letters addressed to his Class in 1848.

The author describing to his readers her diseases and the means of cure presents a picture of woman with all her attributes, as a sentient, excitable and imaginative being, easily affected by the surrounding influences of sky and air and social habits, craving for admiration, affection and friendship, charming even in her smaller vanities, and noble in the devoted discharge of domestic and religious duties at every sacrifice. From her come the quickening spirit of the charities and amenities of the world, all that adds grace to civilization, and impels and sustains man in deeds of patriotism and practical philanthropy.

The author illustrates his view of woman's nature by drawing on physiology, psychology, classic lore, and the collateral aids of poetry and the fine arts, with such happy adaptation as to make that which might at first seem to be diffuse and extraneous matter, appear to be a part of the general argument, not merely to show what woman is, but in what variety of channels the physician must carry his scrutiny, and what a

variety of means he must enlist for the treatment of her maladies, compounded, as they so often are, of both bodily and mental troubles.

A similar problem, although not quite so complex and puzzling, comes up continually for study and solution in dealing with the diseases of the other sex, and we are forced, after a review of the whole field, to the conclusion, that often, very often, the smaller part of the curative means employed by a physician, consists in prescribing drugs to his patient. But whilst thus abstinent in one direction, he takes higher ground in another, as a minister of nature and expounder of the philosophy of life. The author of *Letters to his Class* does not fail to speak of woman's early readiness to receive the lessons of Christianity, and the consolation which she subsequently derived from being imbued with its spirit.

He was probably incited to prepare this work by his having, three years before the publication of his *Letters*, made a translation of the treatise of Colombat de L'Isère on the diseases and Special Hygiene of Females, which he held in great esteem, and in which he introduced notes and additions.

In his intentness to diffuse a knowledge of the subject as taught from his chair on Midwifery and the diseases of Women and Children, in the Jefferson Medical College, he spared no labor, and seemed to invite, as it were, literary and professional rivalry. His next original performance was a treatise entitled *Obstetrics the Science and the Art*, in 1849, which he wrought *ex cathedra*, with the weight of large experience and discriminative ability.

The Dublin Quarterly Journal declares this work to contain a "vast amount of practical knowledge, by one who has accurately observed and retained the experience of many years, and tells the result in a free, pleasant, and easy manner." A German journal thought that, with some condensation, the volume is well adapted for translation into German. Our American journals abound in their praises of this, as, indeed, of most of the other productions of the author. Following this volume, "Certain Diseases of Young Children," in 1850, and in 1854, a *Treatise on Acute and Chronic Diseases of the Neck of the Uterus*, with plates, colored and plain; many of the former of them received the touch of his own brush. "Throughout this work," says the Dublin Journal already quoted, "are valuable practical suggestions, as coming from Dr. Meigs," and most of the colored plates are described to be "very beautiful and graphic."

Nearly simultaneous with the appearance of this volume was that on *Child-bed Fevers*. In the same year, which was that of the second visitation of epidemic cholera in Philadelphia, he gave in a brochure his thoughts on this disease, termed by him spasmodic cholera, for private distribution.

Next in order of time comes his volume on the *Nature, Signs, and Treatment of Child-bed Fevers*, in 1854. He strenuously advocated the non-contagiousness of Puerperal Fever, and the preference to be given to venesection in its treatment, in both of which views he subjected himself to much opposing inculcation, and severe, abusive criticism. He

had, several years previously, indicated his creed on the subject, by introducing to the profession, by an introduction and notes, short monographs by Hey, Armstrong, and Lee, in 1842.

The Treatise on Child-bed Fevers was pronounced by the Edinburgh Journal to be superior to any one work upon the same subject.

Memoir on the Ovum, Philosophical Society Transactions, translation from the French of a small volume of Flourens on Phrenology.

Dr. Meigs was no silent member of the different societies with which he became connected. The Records of the Philadelphia College of Physicians, of which he was some years Secretary, the American Philosophical Society, and the Academy of Natural Science, bear proofs of his professional and scientific zeal. Notice has already been taken of the large share he had in editing and contributing to the North American Medical Journal. He was also a contributor to Chapman's Journal of Medical and Physical Sciences, and its successor in due sequence; the American Journal of Medical Science; also the Medical Examiner, and the New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal.

Dr. Meigs, when Secretary of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, introduced to that body two gentlemen from New England, delegates to represent in different quarters the flood of evil resulting from the use of intoxicating liquors, and to take measures for diminishing its violence and destructive effects, by discontinuing the use of distilled spirits. His own habits always temperate, and finding in a fervid imagination incentives to thought, he never sought the unnatural excitement of the bottle, and hence readily adopted the first steps in the temperance reformation, by his abstaining steadily from the use of distilled spirits, and withholding them, as far as possible, from his patients. He did not carry his detestation of alcohol so far, however, as to inhibit its use in fermented liquors, and tobacco found in him a regular customer.

Dr. Meigs allowed himself but little respite from professional toil, and, with few exceptions, took no vacations, such as are of right, and almost of necessity, the practice of most medical men in the summer months. In the year 1842 he visited Mackinaw and the Falls of St. Anthony, to recruit his almost exhausted energies, and in 1845 he visited Europe for a similar purpose. During a few months absence on this occasion, he made the acquaintance of many of the medical notabilities of France and England, who were prepared, by the reputation which he had acquired, and a knowledge of his works, to receive him with appreciative cordiality. In Paris he read a paper on Cyanosis, in French, before the Academy of Medicine, and received warm commendation from some of the members, not only for his very ingenious view of the subject, but for his good idiomatic and well-spoken language on the occasion.

At a later period, in his Treatise on Certain Diseases of Young Children, he enters into anatomical and physiological details, explanatory of the cause of Cyanosis, and of his new method of treating it. The novel feature in the latter consisted in turning the child on its right side, and slightly raising its head and shoulders. Several instances are given by the author of the success of this procedure, which, considering that

Cyanosis occurs under different anatomical conditions of the heart, can only be expected to be serviceable in some of them.

In common with the majority of his fellow-practitioners in Philadelphia, Dr. Meigs was slow in having recourse to etherization in his Obstetric cases, and to the use of chloroform he was opposed to the last; and certainly not without reason, when scarcely a week passes but we hear of death from chloroform, when used as an æsthetic for women in tedious and painful labor, and for surgical operations, some of them of a very slight nature. And the question of anæsthetics was discussed in letters between Sir James Simpson, of Edinburgh, and Dr. Meigs, a pleasant feature of which consisted in the courteous manner in which the parties treated each other.

Dr. Meigs soon won the confidence of his patient by his calm and collected deportment, encouraging speech, and readiness of resources required on the occasion. In the unlooked-for absence of the nurse, and the inability of any female member of the family to take her place, he promptly gave the requisite manual help to both the newly-born infant and the mother. Sometimes his direction and explanation were needlessly interwoven with technical terms, not from any desire to throw words of long and novel sound into the ears of those present, but from a fulness at the moment of language so constantly akin in his own mind to the subject. So far from desiring to shroud his meaning in professional lore, he advocated instruction of mothers and nurses in elementary medicine. The safer and more generally useful learning to be acquired by these parties should be physiology and hygiene, or a knowledge of the means of preserving health and preventing disease, leaving the cure to a fully educated and experienced physician. Advancing years, and the continued wear and tear of professional life, and still more of the Department of Obstetrics to which Dr. Meigs had so long and earnestly devoted himself, could not fail to produce their effects on the strongest body and the most elastic mind, and to begin a grave monition to abate labor, if not to take entire rest. There are few persons, of whatever pursuit or occupation, who do not look forward to the period when they can retire from active business, and end their days in the enjoyment of the long-coveted comforts and ease, in the society of their family and of friends.

The subject of this memoir had long sighed for freedom from his arduous duties of teacher and practitioner, and for leisure to indulge his literary tastes and his fondness for natural science. In proof of the sincerity of his intention to procure these enjoyments, he made preparation by purchase of a piece of land and the erection of a house, five miles beyond Media, in a beautiful region of country. He yielded with pleasant equanimity to the conviction that he was getting old, and determined to avail himself of the compensation which age brings with it. The first step was diminishing his professional labor; the next, the resignation of his Chair in the College. This event took place after the course of 1859-1860, to the regret of his associates and the crowds of students all

all over the land, who had anticipated the pleasure and instructions from his prelections, on which those in advance of them had descanted so lovingly.

In accepting his resignation, the Trustees made him Emeritus Professor, but neither he nor they believed at the time that this honorary distinction would soon be made a ground for the resumption of his labors at the very next session of the College. It so happened, however, that the gentleman, Wm. V. Keating, who had been appointed his successor, and had set about preparing himself for his requisite duties, deemed himself not strong enough in bodily health for their active discharge, without being recruited by a visit to Europe during the summer, but which he deemed it most prudent to prolong for another year. In his emergency, an appeal was made to the recent Emeritus Professor to fill the unexpectedly vacant chair, and thus repeat once more his lectures. Before another scholastic year had begun, Dr. Ellerslie Wallace became in due course of election the regular successor.

At last Dr. Meigs found himself in the country-home of his own creation, and free to pass his time in the pleasures of his books and his garden. Of the latter he could say with Dr. Arnold, it was a constant source of amusement both to himself and wife. Our people require to be more frequently reminded of the observation of Sir William Temple, that "gardening has been the inclination of kings and the choice of philosophers, so it has been the common favorite of public and private men, a pleasure of the greatest and the care of the meanest;" and, indeed, continuing to use the illustrious author's own words, "an employment and a possession, in which no man is too high or too low." But a sad break was to be made in this united enjoyment by the death of Mrs. Meigs, which took place on May 13th, 1865.

With her loss he was left to cling more tenaciously to his cherished studies and out-door recreations, while still separating only for a portion of the year from his children and their families in the city, some one of them having him at their homes in winter, and passing the summer with him in the country. Desultory reading soon wearies, and the thoughtful mind finds it necessary to pass even a part of the hours of leisure in reading with a definite object, by bringing the *res disjecta* into shape under a regular literary or scientific garniture. Deep research is not called for to meet the wants of even an already well-read scholar, so much as a method and classification in bringing the several topics and facts in disquisition before him from day to day. Dr. Meigs gained fresh pleasure from the garden, by uniting the study of vegetable physiology with that of the natural groups in Flora's domain, and thus seeing the relation of growth and the varied products for the gratification of the eye and the palate, in flowers, fruits, and esculents.

In ethnology, a new branch of anthropology, the subject of our memoir took a deep interest, affording, as it does, such a wide scope for historic research and inquiry into one's kindred in country and race, the origin

and affiliation of the first families of mankind, our remote ancestors, the privileged stock, comparatively small in number to the rest of the population on the face of the earth, but the peoples of which have in all times dominated and shaped the destinies of the rest.

The historian can make but small advances in studying and describing the rise and progress of nations, and their decline and fall, or in finding an explanation of the results of the competitive struggle for empire and domination, unless he shall have acquired a knowledge of the differences of races of mankind, and of their great families or peoples. History, aided by ethnological teachings, is no longer a mere registry of conquests and revolutions. It shows the innate differences in aptitude or capacity for improvement and civilization, irrespective of the external modifying circumstances of locality or climate. In one people we see a rapid germination of the seeds of knowledge, and a subsequent growth and culture, whilst in another people the growth of similar seeds is slower, the plant sickly, and soon decays, while in a third, again, there is no yield—all is barrenness.

Dr. Meigs took great delight in reading and re-reading the work of the Count de Gobineau, "Sur l'inégalité des Races Humaines." Marginal notes show the careful attention which he gave to the utterances of this author, with whom he had a friendly correspondence; and so far did he carry his admiration of the French *sarav*, that his very latest literary exercise and amusement was a translation of a work of fiction of the Count's, called "L'Abbaye de Typhanes," intended to exhibit the manners and customs of the people of the 12th century.

Thus, in the midst of his loving family, the endearments of his friends, and the respect of the community, Dr. Meigs filled up the measure of his allotted days. His decease took place on the 22d June, 1869, at the age of 77 years. He had retired to his chamber in the evening at bedtime, making no complaint of any deviation from his usual state of health, except of some pain, for which he took a few drops of laudanum, as he had done on previous occasions for the same cause. As the next morning advanced without his appearing, one of the family went to his room, and saw him lying in bed, with his head resting on one arm, in the attitude of quiet sleep; but it was the sleep of death.

He had breathed his last in the course of the night, without a struggle or a pang, and thus passed from time to eternity, saved from the often protracted bodily and mental distress and pains which fall to the lot of so many, before death comes to relieve them of their sufferings.

Thus disappeared from amongst us a good man, an estimable citizen, and an accomplished physician, leaving, as a legacy to the world the memory of his wise teachings for the relief of suffering humanity, his own personal labors for the same object, his kindly and disinterested nature, aspiration for the noble and the beautiful, a cultivated intellect, and refined tastes.